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ABSTRACT

Because only 10 percent of students admitted to the University of Washington through the Educational Opportunity Program were able to graduate from the university, a basic writing course using literature to develop students' academic thinking skills was developed. Literature to which students could relate more easily, such as "Farewell to Manzanar" and "No No Boy," was selected for the class, and students kept a reader's and writer's journal in which they responded to questions about the literature. Alan Purves's four stages of response to literature--engagement, perception, interpretation, and evaluation--were used as a framework for the progression of journal and discussion questions and for assigned unedited journal pieces later expanded into essays. In spite of the interactional reading and writing and the attempt to enlarge perspectives, many of the students continue to respond to only a portion of the text. Nevertheless, basic writing students in particular need to assimilate their own experiences and values so that they feel that their opinions have worth, and the academic community has a responsibility to assist those students in achieving that goal. (DF)

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USING LITERATURE TO ENCOURAGE ACADEMIC THINKING IN A BASIC WRITING COURSE

At the University of Washington, we are faced with a problem shared by most large urban universities--a growing number of students who cannot read or write well enough to be academic students in the traditional sense, but who are able to enter the university via the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Placed at one of three levels on the basis of their high school transcripts and entrance scores, some need only to take a few required courses they lack; others are definite long shots who, in spite of a little scholarship money, counseling and tutoring (as limited as these services are under current funding), will very likely fail or drop out of school. Our basic writing two-quarter sequence course tracks together into homogeneous sections all those EOP students whose placement essays indicate they need more work in English. Blacks, disadvantaged whites, American-born Chinese, Japanese, Indians and Hispanics share the classroom and curriculum with recent immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea and others who have not had any English courses other than ESL. Only ten percent of the students at Level 3 make it through four years and graduate from the University of Washington. How much, if any, of this very complex failure can we say is our fault in the basic writing course, and is there anything we can do about it?

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In the last few years we've read a lot about how what's wrong with basic writers is that they don't think, or they can't think, or, as Andrea Lunsford maintains, they suffer from "cognitive immaturity," a lack of training that leads to concept formation and the use of abstraction. While these students may deal with, God knows, plenty of everyday problems requiring abstract thought based on concepts, they are not aware, Lunsford says, of the concepts they are using. They lack, she says, "the ability to infer principles from their own experience and especially the abilty to get them into written form." They need assignments and subject matter which demand them to form new concepts from existing structures, to synthesize new relationships from existing information. And, says Lunsford, these assignments and subject matter must be student-centered, not teacher-centered, and involve a reintegration of thinking/talking/reading and writing skills.

Agreed. We were certainly coming to view our basic writing course as more and more nonintegrated and unsatisfactory. And our guilt about student failure to make it in the college environment had us, over the years, piling on more and more material for the courses to cover: grammar, so a grammar book. Sentence combining would be good, so we'll have a workbook for that. How about some models for writing?--okay, we'll read in the Norton Sampler. Have to treat the writing "process"--so a basic writing text, but one that covers the modes of exposition because that's the kind of college writing they'll be expected to produce.

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Thinking and reading skills were not really being addressed, while not very motivated students were attempting to work in the modes of analysis characteristic of college discourse: Definition essays on "soul," Classification essays on "three types of professors." Essays that could have been anyone's from anywhere, they were neither analytical nor personal to the thinking and experiences of the individuals who wrote them.

By the end of the course, many students feared they weren't getting any closer to real college writing or to themselves, while a few complained that they would rather have worked some more on plural "s" problems, verb tense mistakes, or vocabulary the way they did in the ESL classes--THESE were the things they felt were standing between them and future academic success.

While they certainly DO face the additional problems of verb tense and "s" endings, students' problems with critical thinking skills may have more to do with their assimilation into the academic community than with any cognitive dysfunction. As Patricia Bizzell pointed out in her 4 C's talk last year, basic writers' problems stem from a combination of their language ability at this point AND their ability to master the language-using practices of the academic community. Part of this, Bizzell says, DOES involve ways of thinking, differences in dialect, un-familiarity with discourse conventions, but it also involves acquiring what she calls the "academic world-view," becoming bi-cultural, re-examinining and, perhaps, giving up students' home world views.

Bizzell cites William Perry, who, in his research on the intellectual and ethical development of college students at Harvard, found that an "academic world view" asks a student "to take a certain distance on his or her commitments, to weigh them against alternatives and to give allegiance only as a result of careful deliberation."

The academic world view does not co-exist peacefully with another world-view in which standards for commitment are different. Basic writers, especially, feel they are being asked to abandon their often less prestigious and socially powerful world views in favor of an academic one which thrives on the notion that there is more than one way to view an issue. Richard Rodriguez, an English professor and former EOP student whose views on the limitations of bilingual and educational opportunity programs have raised a lot of controversy lately, has written of the pain his conversion to the academic world view caused him--including the accompanying estrangement from his family and culture.

It is not enough, Bizzell says, for students to just agree to master the academic world view for personal advancement in the dominant culture. Real mastery, Perry contends, must include coming to terms with and making commitments within BOTH the student's home culture and the academic culture.

While many basic writers are only too happy to indulge us with personal narrative essays about their home culture, we found that it can be difficult getting some students, especially non-native speakers of English, to engage in this sort of home-

cultural reexamination. Judith Oster, in her recent CCC article, says many find this sort of self reflection it "too philosophical" and irrelevant to the mathematics or science careers for which they have been preparing since the beginning of high school.

But all the more reason, Oster emphasizes, to encourage students to engage in this reflection as part of their learning new ways of seeing. "The idea of a university," she says, "should not be withheld from students who are non-native speakers of English simply because their English is still limited (or because they are engineers or because their motive in coming to the university may have been utilitarian)."

Oster also found, as we did, a tendency for non-native speakers to be passive receivers of information in the classroom. Having come from school systems often where there had been no challenging of what the teacher said, no class discussion, little free inquiry and debate, students lacked both the confidence and the academic world view necessary to examine their assumptions, to take a stand and see the full complexity of issues and the need for evidence in support of their positions.

Oster concludes, as have Lunsford and Bizzell and as have we, that the best way to reintegrate language skills and cultivate an academic world view, to broaden, deepen and sharpen students' critical thinking, is to assign reading and encourage students to form opinions, discuss, question and examine what they read, orally and in writing, as members of their own subset of the academic community.

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After some unsuccessful attempts to use novels of social criticism--1984, Lord of the Flies, and Fahrenheit 451--at the end of both the ten-week courses, such that the mode of writing that coincided with the study of the novel was inevitably Compare/Contrast:

> "Compare and contrast the society in Fahrenheit 451 with our society today..."

and then an attempt to have students summarize and critique articles from magazines like Omni and Commentary on issues like censorship, conformity and nuclear war (which produced cliched generalizations at best and whole lifted passages at worst), we decided to have students read and write about autobiographies or autobiographical novels throughout the two-course sequence.

These novels and autobiographies, we thought, would help students come to terms with the two world views, with the feeling of dislocation between cultures, with the values they were afraid of losing or the values they were, perhaps, in the new light of academia, seeing for the first time.

We could start with subjective responses but then introduce more analytical discourse patterns sequentially, as investigative tools for examining both the literature and the students' lives--the cultures they are moving out of and into. Spreading the examination of one literary work over a whole quarter would enable us to also look at the author's concerns: choices she makes about voice, stance, character and audience; the status of a non-white writer in the larger public culture; and finally at the issues in that larger public culture --racism, classism and

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nationalism--that would finally connect students to the larger academic discourse community that is the university.

The problem lay (as it does in the regular writing curriculum as well) in how to move through a sequence of tasks that would spring from the literature, become increasingly analytical and complex, and get beyond what Mike Rose has labeled the "personal and simple/old hat and unacademic" to writing that would not simply be generalizations and pat cliches about racism, classism and nationalism.

Let me take issue with Andrea Lunsford a bit--I think that basic writers CAN generalize. The trouble is that they frequently do so too quickly in their eagerness to move into what they assume is college discourse. The generalizations they make are often cliched, vague and undeveloped because the context in which they are writing simply doesn't matter ("The Three Types of College Professors") or, when they are continually tapping the information they already possess ("How I Came to the United States") and not using it as part of some analysis that is generalizable.

We tried to choose literature that would allow students to relate new information acquired from peer discussion and eventual library research to that personal information which they already had. The not very kind joke among basic writing teachers is that they wonder how many times some of the immigrant students have recycled their "boat people" stories. The fair response to that is how many of these teachers have pushed students beyond the simple narration of that story to some new perspective or

multiperspective rooted in that experience?

In designing a developmental writing sequence that would include a response to literature but move beyond the personal, we enlisted the thinking of several literay theorists whose work in reader-response criticism parallels current thinking in rhetoric and composition theory. For instance James Britton's belief that expressive writing for the self which traces the mind's efforts to think through problems and concepts is the matrix for later more trasnsactional and analytical writing can be coordinated with the position of several reader-response theorists like David Bleich and Louise Rosenblatt, our keynote speaker, who believe that all readers begin their response with a subjective reaction to the experience of the text.

Literary texts, Rosenblatt writes in Literature as Exploration

> ...provide us with a widely broadened "other" through which to define ourselves and our world... reflecting on our meshing with the text can foster the process of self-definition in a variety of ways...the reader can achieve a certain self-awareness, a certain perspective on his own preoccupations, his own system of values.

Rosenblatt encourages teachers not to focus so much on what she calls the "efferent," the non-literary response of the student to what she has read--what is retained, which teachers usually find out by giving quizzes (an admitted temptation in basic writing classes, particularly). She encourages instead our focusing on the "aesthetic" literary experience, what the student is living through while reading the novel.

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David Bleich and Alan Purves agree that it is the student's primary engagement with the text that we want to encourage first, and that that engagement, like Linda Flower's writer-based prose, a sort of conversation between a writer and his own text, is a conversation between a reader and another's text. Bleich suggests that we get students to capitalize on their own gut reaction and associations while reading the text, as their emotional responses to the literature are at the same time responses to their own experiences.

The best way we found to do this was for students to keep a Reader's and Writer's Journal in which their freewrite entries were not finished pieces of writing but explorations and attempts to get closer to the novel. For every couple of chapters we ditto off and pass out questions to think and write about in the journal. These questions attempt to evoke a more emotional response at first:

> Describe a time when the values or behavior of your family clashed with yours, so that, like Jeanne in Farewell to Manzanar, you wanted "to scream...to slide out of sight under the table and dissolve."

and then a more analytical response by the end of the novel and the course:

> Keeping in mind the Japanese-American experience we have read about and the films we saw, argue either that racism in American is as prevalent as ever, or that compared to 1942, there is less racism and this could never happen to a minority group in the U.S. again.

In order to validate and expand upon personal responses to the reading which the students recorded in the journals, once a week we broke up into small discussion groups to examine

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differences and similarities in their responses--different perceptions of characters, of authors' intentions and so forth. Having the responses already written makes for a better, more focused group discussion. Students hear what others have to say, take a stand, support it, enlarge their understanding of the text, and more importantly, as they move into this multiperspective academic world view, take on some academic authority for the vision of the world the literature is giving them. They ARE creating the text out of their responses, out of their experiences, and NOT accepting passively one version of it.

One year, during which we read both Farewell to Manzanar and No-No Boy, two different authors' perspectives on the Japanese-American internment, the class included two Japanese-Americans, one whose father had gone to jail and who was still active in the movement for reparations and another who did not know of his family's internment in the camps until he went home and asked. Their impressions and political attitudes were shared with the rest of the class--including Cambodian refugees only a few years out of camps that were much worse and blacks who still felt the slavery experience of their ancestors to be more severe than the characters' in the books or the students' in the class.

As active participants in the transaction between reader and text, the students examined these different perceptions critically, supported their interpretations and opinions with evidence from the literature and their own lives. As what was private becomes public, they become active participants in a discourse community within a larger one, enlarging their own

texts as well as the texts of the novels.

Alan Purves' four stages of response to literature served as a framework for the progression of these journal and discussion questions and also for assigned unedited pieces to be written in the journals and later expanded into essays.

After Purves' first stage, ENGAGEMENT--the most personal and empathetic, comes PERCEPTION--in which a reader views a text as something other than himself, a product of another writer faced with structural, stylistic and lexical choices. It is important, Rosenblatt says, to get students to "fracture the surface of the text," and see it as something a writer had to compose the same way they have to compose. Why are the events out of order? What must the writer resolve between these two characters before the book can end? How do these characters illustrate two possible solutions to the Japanese loyalty oath problem?

The third stage, INTERPRETATION, is one at which the reader is asked to connect the text back to her world, make inferences from it about the culture and the world. This includes, for us, a research paper making use of at least two articles in support of a student's position on something like "What do you consider to be the most difficult aspect of the resettlement for the Japanese-Americans after their release?"

The fourth stage, EVALUATION, deals with whether it is a "good" work of literature or not.

Despite the interactional reading and writing and the enlarging of perspectives, there are still problems in getting students to move into an academic world view-- many still respond

to only portion of a text. Marolina Salvatori observed her students' inability to tell the difference between the black characters' viewpoints and Maya Angelou's criticism of those viewpoints.

I was surprised to find my students unable to distinguish between the viewpoints in two films on the Japanese internment of World War II which we saw to coincide with our reading of the two novels. One was a U.S. propaganda film made in 1942 narrated by Milton Eisenhower and the other was made 25 years later and featured members of the Japanese-American group seeking reparations. My students confused the film's ironic use of old newsreel footage depicting the Japanese as "little yellow bellies" and the testimony of racist members of the Sons of the Golden West withe the actual political stance of the filmmakers.

If basic writers ARE immature, it is perhaps demonstrated in this willingness to synthesize too quickly, to reach what Ann Berthoff calls "premature closure" in both their interpretation of texts and in their own writing.

It is important for teachers of basic writing, as they encourage analysis, to discourage synthesis that is too easy, too pat and too simplistic. No matter how touching the boat people story as narration or even the boat people story as America-the-land-of-freedom generalization, we must encourage our students to help each other unpack that generalization. And even if after asking WHY of the students' generalizations and WHY of their interpretations of an event or a character's behavior or an author's choice in a novel, the answer is not quite what we'd

hoped it would be, we must tolerate and confront those differences and inconsistencies too.

Further interaction and enlargement of the texts of the films, for instance, revealed many perspectives on the internment of the Japanese-Americans: "Why shouldn't any government suspect those who might have loyalty to another country?" asked the refugee from Cambodia , finally. "Those people didn't have it so bad...they were not exterminated as others were in WW II," said the white "economically disadvantaged" student.

Often what we instructors view as self-loathing shows up in the writing and the discussion: an uncomfortable acceptance of being singled out and of never expecting to assimilate into American culture...or of assuming that one has to assimilate fully. When Jeanne Wakatsuki, the author of Farewell to Manzanar discusses the self-loathing that drove her to baton lessons and a prom queen contest rather than kabuki lessons and tea ceremonies, many recent immigrants in my class thought that this was inevitable--"you do what you have to do in American to get ahead."

We are naive as instructors if we think that ALL students in our basic writing classes as part of their crossing cultures and world views will dig deeper and deeper into themselves and their assumptions. We are also naive if we think they will automatically arrive at some romantic liberal notion of a balance between cultures that jives with some of our notions. For one thing, they know that students in other courses are not

necessarily engaged in this sort of reflection and comparison of values and worldviews, even if we think they should be. Some will dig just deep enough to satisfy what they view as the teacher's voyeurism or good liberal intentions.

We are naive, too, if we think these students, despite their past hardships, are entirely clear on their feelings for the old culture or the new culture--a surprising number of our Asian students have converted before or after coming here to a fundamentalist Christianity that promises salvation, comfort, and, in many cases, escape. Helping students move toward more critical thinking is not the same as having them adopt your own critical model.

One of our instructors just last week asked the class as one of their last writing assignments to write a letter to the director of the basic writing program persuading him to either keep or drop the book Child of the Dark, the diary of a Brazilian woman raising her three children in the slums of Sao Paulo. The class voted 10 for dropping, 7 for keeping it. While the sequence of journal assignments, group discussions and essay topics had dealt first with their subjective responses ("What does your world view cause you to accept or reject in this book?") and finally the global issues of poverty, literacy, child-rearing, capitalism, and Communism; while they had explored what happens to the woman in the book from her point of view and that of others; written about it for different purposes and different audiences, many of the students were simply disappointed that it was not more entertaining or thought it

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irrelevant to a college curriculum (though the same book is required reading on campus in both an anthropology and a sociology course).

Some found it a poor model of writing in a writing course, and others simply didn't see why they needed to know about life in the slums of Brazil, since "such things weren't happening here." This teacher had assumed that almost all of his students would empathize completely with the woman in the book and that reading it would be an important part of their growing awareness in an academic context of where they'd been and where they were going. Perhaps it was only a start for all of them, including the teacher and the director of the program who chose the book.

In this case, because of the problems with it, the interaction with the text Child of the Dark was not over with the end of the class. The Director of Basic Writing, himself a former EOP student with what he admits are his biases, read and responded to their letters and their votes with a text of his own, and there is no time to read all of his reply, but here is an excerpt:

> .... This book was not published to relate a story or to entertain; it was published because what has been written about being poor has almost always been written by members of the middle class who interview slum dwellers or who live in poverty for awhile, or people like me who were raised in the slum but who have received sufficient education to now belong to two worlds, that of the middle class as well as the streets where we grew up.
>
> Carolina's book is published because it is written by an illiterate (meaning uneducated) poor person herself. Written as it is by someone with few writing skills, Child of the Dark is, you are right, written very simply. It is not a good model of how

> you should write, I admit. Effective writing comes from understanding how your world view squares with others. It comes from understanding how the world and ideas of others are different from your own and yet in some general way the same. Brazil is not the same as America. Yet there are people living in cardboard shacks in Chicago, NY, Louisiana and the Carolinas--and the US government has no built-in system to provide for the poor, the hungry and the homeless. Carolina has the good fortune to run into a journalist who recognizes her diary as a rare record of what it means to be poor; he cleans up her writing, publishes it as a book, and her life changes as a result. Was it luck? Was it an act of God? Was it a demonstration that change comes to those who learn to read and write? Will college make you richer? Or will you need God and luck on your side?
>
> All of these issues I found in the book. They are things to think about, things to write about. A professor of mine once defined "literature" as writing that forces us to ask the questions we don't normally ask. Some literature does that by way of a story, some by way of a record of life...I am sorry that so many of you thought the book to be without issues relevant to your lives. Poverty, literacy, politics and child-rearing all strike me as relevant issues. I don't know yet if the book will be retained next year. You have given me some things to consider, and I thank you for your candor.

A text, as George Dillon has pointed out, does not stand alone. It is a transaction first between a writer and a text and then between reader and text. It is written by someone who inhabits a community and read by someone else who inhabits that community.

Increasingly we become aware that our classes ARE a community and that we can read and write about literature in accordance, not with one interpretation, but with the dictates of our academic community AND each of our own experiences.

When we ask students to write about themselves, we may only tap their prior experiences and so limit the variety and extent

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of their thinking and writing. If we use literature to present new opportunities for interaction, we draw them into wider and wider public and academic world views. It is within a literate context that they will primarily work in college, reading others' texts, responding to what has been written, creating new statements from the thoughts and writings of others.

All students could stand to do some clarifying of their lives, goals and beliefs before they rush into college work and learn to depend so heavily on the ideas of others. But basic writing students, especially, need to work through their own experiences and values to a sense that their ideas and opinions will matter, along with those of many other people in this new academic community. If that many of these students are failing to make it, it could be because this community somehow never seems to find a way to include them.